

Mental Health Select Committee
Queensland Parliament

21 February, 2022

Dear committee members.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Mental Health Select Committee in relation to the *Inquiry into the opportunities to improve mental health outcomes for Queenslanders*. I write in my capacity as the State Member for Cooper, the observations made in this submission are informed from the feedback collated from professionals and individuals within this electorate.

On 9th February 2022 I facilitated a roundtable with local service providers. Those service providers included representatives from:

- Communitify (support service)
- Brisbane Bronco's
- Marist College Ashgrove
- Ithaca State School
- Kelvin Grove Secondary College
- Local Refugee and Migrant support services
- Local disability support services
- Representatives from a local supported accommodation service provider
- The Lions Club
- Local church leaders and representatives
- Private psychologists
- Men's wellbeing centre

Additionally we encouraged people in our community with a lived experience of mental illness to contact me to relay their experiences, their concerns and ideas. This submission summarises these collective conversations.

I understand the committee has already and will continue to hear from those with significant experience in this sector. Those submitters are best placed to pass on their observations and ideas into how Queensland's mental health responses could be reformed.

The observations in this submission potentially may not contribute any new information, but it will demonstrate that the community which makes up the electorate of Cooper are subject to the same experiences as those throughout the state when it comes to Queensland's mental health support network.



I'd like to make the following comments from the outset:

- We need to be alive to the often reductionist narratives used to describe mental illness. These narratives often lead to the stigmatisation and stereotyping of those diagnosed with a mental illness, compounding an already challenging journey.
- People experiencing mental illness are heterogenic, their pathways to diagnosis and accessing services are varied, and accordingly a range of services and responses are required. Ideally these responses should be place-based and directed to the needs of that particular community, whilst still ensuring a standard of care is met throughout the state.

During the roundtable conversation with stakeholders, and following conversations with those experiencing mental illness, the following (local) areas of concern were identified.

- Accessing professional help at the moment in our electorate is extraordinarily difficult, as we suspect it is across the state. Few General Practitioners (GPs) are taking new patients and wait times to access appointments are increasing.
- Greater investment in publicly owned and operated inpatient support services is required, not only in terms of bed numbers, but the design and environment of the services. Attendees spoke about the weathered state of some of the inpatient rooms and furnishings and commented on how that would impact on the overall wellbeing of people who's main focus is on regaining their health.
- Many attendees, particularly those working directly with children and young people reported observing an increase in levels of anxiety amongst children and families. A number of reasons were suggested for this, including the pressures on working families, increasing pressures on young people to achieve good grades and focus on career paths from an early age.

This increased anxiety was reportedly compounded by COVID-19, for example increased experiences of social isolation, disruption to learning, fear of becoming unwell or having a loved one become unwell, separation from families (particularly those interstate or overseas), unable to participate in significant life events (eg formals).

- The issue of sexuality and gender was discussed, with a focus on how media reporting and political narratives can be psychologically damaging for those communities. Tailored services need to be tailored specifically towards the LGBTIQ+ communities.
- Investment in early intervention is vitally important. People spoke of their support towards the 'fence at the top of the cliff' as being far more effective and preferred than the 'ambulance at the bottom'.
- Focus needs to be on community-based responses. Local and integrated service providers are best placed to respond to the needs of their communities. Ideally place-based responses, where individuals can be essentially case-managed cooperatively by those agencies involved in a person's life were recommended.

- Addressing the structural issues surrounding mental health, such as poverty, stable and dignified housing, stable employment, social connection – needs to be the priority area of focus.
- Housing insecurity is becoming an increasing concern for people in our electorate. Rental availability is becoming scarcer, and the price of rentals is increasing. People who have been long-term residents are no longer able to afford to remain in our community and are having to relocate (often then uprooting children from school and their social connections). Housing diversity is a real problem.
- Pressures in the school environment can lead to greater levels of anxiety – a number of people spoke to the importance of having a human-centred approach which allows children and young people to pursue the things that they enjoy as an individual rather than having a disproportionate focus on academic results.
- Environments are extremely impactful on children – whether it be school, home or sporting – it is important to equip each of these environment’s leaders with the skills to address mental health concerns.
- The increase from 10 to 20 subsidised sessions (mental health plan) by the federal government was welcomed by service providers, but there are not the psychologists available to see new patients. Many are not taking new patients, and any new spots are going to people who can afford the full out of pocket cost. Access to psychiatrists for diagnosis is also extremely difficult within our electorate.
- The need to continue investing in programs and services that divert people (particularly children and young people) away from alcohol and other drugs was raised.

Encouragingly, a number of opportunities were identified throughout these discussions:

- Social connection is a protective factor, and is cost-effective. Our electorate is home to a number of community groups, which facilitate this social connection. However it was noted that competition for resources was an emerging threat. For example, population increases and demand for services are outstripping supply. Most of the sporting clubs in our electorate have waiting lists, they are unable to expand their teams because they simply don’t have the field space to run more teams.
- This above point is exacerbated by a reduction in public space available particularly in the inner suburbs of our electorate. For example, most school ovals are now leased by sporting clubs (which is great, however it reduces the opportunity for sports to occur informally – for example amongst neighbourhood kids – on those fields. Additionally there is just one neighbourhood centre in the Cooper electorate, and a number of the community halls operating in our electorate have or are being sold and developed into private accommodation.
- Focusing support towards children and families earlier pays dividends over the lifetime of treating a person. Rather than funding and services being targeted towards the person in need, it was raised that it might be an opportunity to treat and respond to the familial needs.

- Educators spoke about the benefit in empowering schools to design in a focus on positive mental health, ensuring that conversations and solutions in addressing this become part of the school culture.
- The importance of physical health and wellbeing was identified as a strong protective factor for all people. Ensuring a wide array of community sport is available is important, however we also need to ensure that its affordable and accessible to all communities (including people with a disability)
- School representatives spoke about the importance of celebrating all career pathways in life. Trades are as vital as professional services for example.
- The importance of integrating culture into everyday life and acknowledging the country on which we live was identified as important not only for our first Australians, but for all citizens.
- It was suggested by one participant that this Committee look at the work of the older persons unit in Tasmania. The participant had direct experience with this unit (in relation to the care of a loved one diagnosed with schizophrenia) and highly recommended the service.

Thank you for accepting our submission.

Regards

Jonty Bush MP
Member for Cooper